

# Mainland Immigrant and Hong Kong Local Students' Psychological Sense of School Membership

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A Chinese version of the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale was developed to find out the subjective PSSM of Mainland immigrant and local Hong Kong students. Five schools participated with 295 boys and 252 girls from Primary years 4, 5, and 6 taking part. Among those, 264 students were local Hong Kong students, while 283 were Mainland immigrant students who claimed that they had lived in Hong Kong for 7 years or less. The Chinese version of the PSSM scale was found to be reliable, and interestingly, Mainland immigrant students were found to have a significantly higher sense of school belonging, but had a lower feeling of rejection than Hong Kong students did. Results would be useful to understand how students feel towards support in school.

Keywords: psychological sense of school membership (PSSM), Chinese version of PSSM, Mainland immigrant students, local Hong Kong students

Different studies have shown that students who feel more of a sense of belonging to their school are likely to be more persistent academically, put more effort into learning and studying (Tinto, 1997), make more affective, cognitive, and behavioral connections to school (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993), have better educational outcomes (Goodenow, 1993), have a more positive self-concept, more positive teacher-student relations, and lower social-emotional distress (Hagborg, 1998). According to Osterman (2000), terms such as, belongingness, relatedness, acceptance, membership, and sense of community deal with students' psychological experiences of support and involvement in school.

The physical attendance of students in school does not necessarily make them feel that they belong in their school, or with their class, teachers and classmates. In fact, it is believed that membership is gradually developed through the reciprocal social relations between the students and others in the school

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(Goodenow, 1993). According to the study of dropout prevention by Wahlage (1989), school membership includes four components. The first component – attachment – is the personal investment students make to meet the expectations of others, to care about what others think, and to develop positive reciprocal teacher-student relations. The second component – commitment – involves students complying with school rules and demands. The third component is involvement, and concerns students' active participation in school activities and tasks. Finally, the fourth component is belief, and this component is related to students valuing and trusting the school (Hagborg, 1998).

While much literature has been documented in Western societies to understand the school membership of students of different race and ethnicity, little study has been undertaken in Hong Kong, an Asian city, which has around one-tenth of its population, aged under 15 from Mainland China. In light of this, examining the psychological sense of membership of students who have emigrated from Mainland China and comparing it with that of local Hong Kong students certainly brings fresh insight to the discussion. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to apply the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale to the two cohorts, to discover their psychological experiences of support and involvement in school.

## **The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale**

Based on Wahlage's study of school membership, Goodenow has developed an 18-item instrument (known as the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale) that investigates school membership of junior secondary school students in the US. The items are phrased in terms of individual frame of reference probing for a global factor – the subjective sense of belonging in school. A study by Hagborg (1994), focusing on US middle and upper secondary school students, showed that the items of the PSSM scale can be classified into three different factors – belonging, rejection, and acceptance. The first factor (belonging), which includes 13 of the 18 items, presents a general aspect of school membership. The second factor (rejection), includes 3 items, and is about students' feelings of personal acceptance among their classmates. The third factor (acceptance), which includes only 2 items, is intended to measure student acceptance of and pride in their school.

The PSSM scale was found to be reliable. According to Hagborg's study (1994), the alpha results of the English version of the scale for US students studying in Grades 5 to 12 ranged from .71 to .94. While this English version was applied mostly to students studying in the US, in Goodenow's study (1993), a Spanish version of the PSSM scale was developed, and it had an alpha value of .77 for 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Hispanic students studying in the US.

Studies have also looked into the sense of belonging in schools that contain a mixture of students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds (Lee & Davis, 2000). Arhar and Kromrey's study (1993) shows that black students are more bonded to their school than white students in low socio-economic status (SES) schools whilst black students are less bonded to their schools than white students are in high SES schools. Furthermore, Gallager's study (1996) also suggested that secondary school students who have lived in the community for 2 or more years have a significantly higher sense of belonging to their school than students who have lived there for less than 2 years. As students' subjective sense of belonging can affect their academic and social adjustment in school, investigating this variable of different groups of students is considered to be important.

### **Mainland immigrant students**

Due to political considerations, the Hong Kong government has allowed the quota of new arrivals from Mainland China to increase to 150 per day, and after 7 years of living in Hong

Kong the new arrivals are able to become permanent Hong Kong residents. Though both the people of Hong Kong and Mainland China are considered as Chinese, there are cultural differences between the two groups. According to the data provided by the Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) (the former Education Department), from 1997 to 2001, there were 67,834 newly arrived students from Mainland China in primary schools and 12,641 in secondary schools. After arriving in Hong Kong, these new arrivals are assigned to different school districts in Hong Kong based on their area of residence.

Research shows that newly arrived students face many problems whilst studying in an unfamiliar school setting with new classmates and teachers. For instance, they may experience a language barrier when studying in Hong Kong. This is because the local students mainly use Cantonese in school whilst students from Mainland China use Putonghua or other Chinese dialects. In fact, the strokes of written Chinese characters used in Hong Kong and Mainland China vary considerably. Therefore, the new arrivals need to learn how to speak and write Chinese in a different way in Hong Kong. Moreover, the education systems of Hong Kong and Mainland China are quite different, and new arrivals especially have problems in their English lessons since the level of English in Mainland China is lower than in Hong Kong. Additionally, because of the differing education systems of Hong Kong and Mainland China, some new arrivals are placed in classes not relevant to their own age groups. According to a study done by Chan et al. (1998), approximately 55% and 80% of the primary and secondary new arrival students, respectively, are placed in classes behind their own age groups. For this reason, these students may feel embarrassed and frustrated at being placed in lower level classes.

All of the above aspects may affect their sense of belonging in school and, as mentioned, students' sense of belonging may influence their academic motivation, aspirations and outcomes. Therefore, in this study, the sense of belonging in school between local Hong Kong students and students who have immigrated to Hong Kong from Mainland China (known as Mainland immigrant students) for 7 years or less will be investigated by using the Chinese version of the PSSM scale.

## **Method**

### **Subjects**

According to the data given by the Hong Kong EMB, there are 3 school districts in Hong Kong, and within these 3

districts, there are 18 school areas. Five primary schools were chosen from a school area with the most primary school new arrivals; in fact, this school area is included in the school district with the highest number of such students. Generally speaking, the five schools that were involved in this study were located in areas of comparatively low SES. Students studying in Primary years 4, 5, and 6 participated in this study and, in each school, all classes of the three levels participated. There were a total of 547 students, with 130 from Primary 4 (average age of 10.09), 163 from Primary 5 (average age of 11.17), and 254 from Primary 6 (average age of 12.33). Amongst these 547 students, 295 were boys and 252 were girls. 264 students were Hong Kong local students (had never lived in Mainland China before); while 283 Mainland immigrant students claimed that they had lived in Hong Kong for 7 years or less. Seven years was used as the cut-off line since immigrants from the Mainland need to stay in Hong Kong for 7 years to become permanent Hong Kong residents.

### Instrument

The original English version of the PSSM scale was found in both Goodenow's (1993) and Hagborg's (1994) studies. The procedures for creating the Chinese version of the PSSM scale in this study were that the 18 items of the original PSSM created by Goodenow were first translated from English into Chinese. Then, an in-depth discussion was carried out with 10 Primary 5 students (5 boys and 5 girls) to check their understanding of the translated items. The aim of the discussion was, in fact, to check if the wording of the items in the Chinese version of the PSSM scale were understood by students studying in Hong Kong primary schools. With some modification of the wording and sentence structure in the items after discussion with the 10 students, the items written in Chinese were translated back into English again to verify the translation against the original English items. All 18 items from Goodenow's original English PSSM were kept in the Chinese version (see Appendix 1). Besides the 18 items on students' sense of belonging in school, students were asked to indicate their gender, date of birth, and the time they had lived in Mainland China (Have you ever lived in Mainland China? If yes, from month / year to month / year).

Among the 18 items, there were 5 negative items (namely Items 3, 6, 9, 12 and 16), and students were required to answer each item on a scale of 1 to 6 (1 means strongly disagree and 6 means strongly agree). When the scale of these 5 negative items was changed to positive items, the alpha for these 18

items (including Primary 4, 5, and 6 students) was .89. When the three primary levels were separated, the alpha for Primary 4 was .89, Primary 5 was .90, and Primary 6 was .89. The Chinese version of the PSSM scale was then claimed to be reliable with reference to the subjects of this study.

When factor analysis was run (with principal components analysis as the method for factor extraction, followed by oblique rotation) (Norušis, 2000) for the 18 items of the Chinese version of the PSSM scale, two factors were extracted (as seen in Table 1). The first factor consisted of 13 items and the second factor consisted of the 5 negative items. The two factors explained 44.9% of the total variance (the first factor explained 37.5% and the second factor explained 7.4%). The first factor had an alpha of .88 and the second factor had an alpha of .71.

A Scree test was also used to show the number of factors to be retained (see Figure 1). The two factors to be retained were those that lay before the point at which the *Eigenvalues* seemed to level off. The first factor had an *Eigenvalue* of 6.75 and the second factor had an *Eigenvalue* of 1.34.

Table 1. Rotated factor loadings for the 18 items of the PSSM scale

Item	Factor 1		Factor 2
	School Belonging	Feeling of Rejection	
Item 2	.75		
Item 5	.70		
Item 15	.68		
Item 14	.67		
Item 4	.67		
Item 11	.66		
Item 8	.66		
Item 17	.66		
Item 1	.59		
Item 13	.58		
Item 18	.56		
Item 7	.55		
Item 10	.53		
Item 3			.78
Item 12			.71
Item 6			.57
Item 9			.48
Item 16			.36
<i>Eigenvalue</i> (% of variance explained)	6.75 (37.5%)		1.34 (7.4%)

*Note.* Only values of 0.35 or above are shown in the table

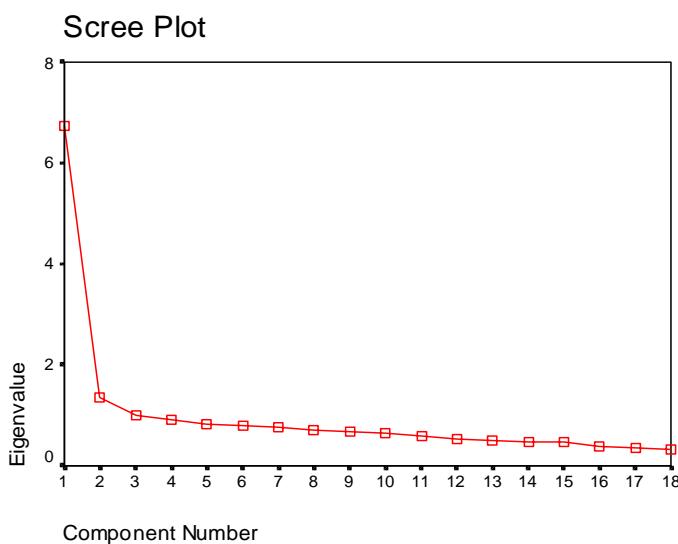


Figure 1. Scree plot of Eigenvalues for the 18 items of PSSM

When compared to the factor analysis of the English version of the PSSM scale found in Hagborg's study (1994), the factor analysis of the Chinese version in this study was easier to interpret and understand. In Hagborg's study (1994), Items 3, 6, and 12 were extracted into the factor known as 'rejection', and Items 16 and 17 were extracted into another factor known as 'acceptance'. The rest of the 13 items were then extracted into the factor called 'belonging'. In this study, however, results from the factor analysis showed that the 18 items were nicely extracted into 2 factors, with 13 items loaded into Factor 1, and therefore, similar to Hagborg's study (1994); the first factor will also be known as 'school

belonging'. Note that, unlike Hagborg's study (1994), Item 17 (I feel proud of being in this school) falls into this factor, while Item 9 (Teachers here are not interested in people like me) is under the second factor. This makes good sense because having a feeling of belonging to a school necessarily entails the feeling of being proud of the school, and obviously if students find teachers are not interested in them, they would not feel that they belonged but would instead feel rejected. The second factor, which consists of the 5 negative items (Items 3, 6, 9, 12, and 16), will be known as 'feeling of rejection'. A review of the 5 negative items suggests a factor that encompasses the rejected feeling students received from school, and as mentioned, Hagborg's study had Items 3, 6, and 12 in the factor of 'rejection'. Therefore, in this study, the overall psychological sense of school membership is represented by two factors, namely 'school belonging' and 'feeling of rejection'.

## Results

When an independent sample t-test was run between the Hong Kong and Mainland immigrant students (who had lived in Hong Kong for 7 years or less), it was found that the Mainland students had significantly higher sense of school belonging but a lower feeling of rejection in school. Table 2 presents the results.

In a similar way, Mainland immigrant students who had lived in Hong Kong for 5 years or less had significantly higher sense of school belonging but a lower feeling of rejection in school. Results are also presented in Table 2. Interestingly, when the independent sample t-test was run between Hong Kong and Mainland immigrant students (who had lived in

Table 2. Compared mean between Hong Kong and Mainland immigrant students (7, 5, and 3 years or less in Hong Kong)

Categories	Mainland Student			Hong Kong Student			Sig. (by t-test)
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Mainland immigrant students 7 years or less in Hong Kong							
School belong	283	4.33	.77	264	3.99	.88	.000
Feeling of rejection	283	2.53	.99	264	2.82	.96	.000
Mainland immigrant students 5 years or less in Hong Kong							
School belong	229	4.34	.77	318	4.04	.87	.000
Feeling of rejection	229	2.48	.91	318	2.81	.96	.000
Mainland immigrant students 3 years or less in Hong Kong							
School belong	123	4.36	.83	424	4.11	.84	.004
Feeling of rejection	123	2.55	.99	424	2.71	.95	.017

Table 3. *Compared mean between boys and girls*

Categories	Boys			Girls			Sig. (by t-test)
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
School of belong	295	4.08	.86	252	4.26	.89	.012
Feeling of rejection	295	2.82	.96	252	2.49	.91	.000

Hong Kong for 3 years or less), it was found that there were no significant differences in the feeling of rejection. However, as Table 2 shows, Mainland immigrant students had a significantly higher sense of school belonging than Hong Kong students.

Furthermore, there were significant differences found between boys and girls on the two factors. As shown in Table 3, girls had a higher feeling of school belonging but a lower feeling of rejection than boys did in school.

Finally, when the compared mean was run amongst Primary 4, 5, and 6 students by using One-Way ANOVA, there was no significant difference found among them.

## Discussion

By keeping all the 18 items from the original English version of the PSSM scale, this study has demonstrated that the Chinese version of the PSSM scale was useful in finding out the psychological sense of school membership of primary school students studying in Hong Kong. Thirteen items fell logically into the factor of school belonging (similar to Hagborg's study (1994)), and the rest of the 5 negative items fell into another factor known as the feeling of rejection. Both factors had acceptable alpha values in this study indicating that they are reliable in measuring two different substantive variables.

Interestingly, it was found that Mainland immigrant students (who had stayed in Hong Kong for 7, 5, and 3 years or less) had a significantly higher sense of school belonging than Hong Kong students who had lived in Hong Kong all their lives. On the other hand, Hong Kong students had a significantly higher feeling of rejection than the Mainland immigrant students. Unlike the results of other studies, immigrant students should have a lower psychological sense of school membership than local students (Gallagher, 1996; Lee & Davis, 2000). Several reasons may contribute to such an outcome.

First of all, the schools that were selected for this study were within the school district or school area that has the most Mainland immigrant students. According to the number of

students participating in this study, amongst the 547 students, 283 were considered as Mainland immigrant students who had stayed in Hong Kong for 7 years or less. Similar to Arhar and Kromrey's study (1993) that black students were found to be more bonded to their school than white students in low SES schools, Mainland immigrant students appeared to be more bonded in school than Hong Kong students were. When Mainland immigrant students first attend their school, it is not difficult for them to realize that many students are not local Hong Kong students (as mentioned earlier, Mainland immigrant students speak Putonghua or different Chinese dialects). It is especially easy for Mainland immigrant students to bond with each other since they may have the same experiences, feelings, problems, and family background. It does not take long for them, from their point of view, to find peers that are friendly and are able to value, accept, and respect them.

From the school viewpoint, principals and teachers are aware of the problems of Mainland immigrant students, and many schools offer special activities for them in order to make them feel that they belong to their school. For example, different kinds of learning groups are organized to allow Hong Kong and Mainland immigrant students to learn together, and learn and understand each other so as to maximize trust and minimize discrimination. Schools are trying their best to help these students become absorbed and fully integrate into the mainstream education system. In addition, according to the data from the Aberdeen Kai-fong Welfare Association Service Centre (Chen et al., 1998), schools do arrange Cantonese, English, tutoring, and adaptation courses for newly arrived students and these courses may lower the discrepancies of the academic level between Hong Kong and Mainland immigrant students. New arrivals with special learning problems also receive extra attention and tutoring from teachers. Based on Chan's study (2002), 89% of the new arrivals in her study claimed that their teachers are trustworthy and are supportive of them. All of the above activities aim to assist Mainland immigrant students to bond and have a feeling of belonging to their school and teachers.

Similar to the study by Goodenow and Grady (1993), this study showed that girls had a higher sense of school belonging

than boys did, and there was no significant difference amongst different grade levels. Based on the results of this study, the hard work that schools have undertaken to help Mainland immigrant students increase their psychological sense of school membership has been meaningful and successful. However, it is equally important to be concerned about the psychological sense of school membership of local Hong Kong students. When students find themselves to be full and valued members of their school, they will put more effort and commitment into the aims and goals of the school. As a result, they are more engaged and successful, and are then more accepted and respected by others in the school (Goodenow, 1992).

## Concluding Remark

Overall, this study does not only ascertain the differences between Mainland immigrant and local Hong Kong students' psychological sense of school membership, it also demonstrates that the Chinese version of the PSSM scale is applicable for students in the Hong Kong school culture and setting. The PSSM scale was first developed in English and a Spanish version was then developed (Goodenow, 1992). This study has contributed to our understanding of this field by taking a step towards widening the use of the PSSM scale and understanding the significance of students' psychological sense of school membership to the Asian school setting.

## Limitations

This study has only chosen to examine a limited number of schools and students of specific districts. Therefore, it may not fully represent the situation of Mainland immigrant and local Hong Kong primary students in Hong Kong. As mentioned, the schools that were involved in this study were located in areas in which most primary school new arrivals study, and only Primary years 4, 5, and 6 students participated.

Moreover, for the in-depth discussion about the Chinese version of the PSSM scale, only 10 Primary 5 students were involved. In fact, Primary 4 and 6 students should also have been invited. However, the 18 items of the Chinese version of the PSSM scale were comprehensible to students of the three primary levels.

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APPENDIX 1. *The Chinese and English versions of the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale*

1. 我感覺自己好像這間學校的一份子。  
I feel like a real part of this school.
2. 這學校的人留意到我善於做某一方面事情。  
People here notice when I'm good at something.
3. 這學校較難接受我這種學生。  
It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. (negative item)
4. 這學校的學生認真地探納我的意見。  
Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.
5. 這學校大部份老師對我感興趣。  
Most teachers here are interested in me.
6. 有時我感覺我好像不屬於這學校。  
Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here. (negative item)
7. 若我有困難時，在學校裡至少有一個老師或成年人是我能向他傾訴的。  
There is at least one teacher or adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.
8. 這學校的人對我很友善。  
People at this school are friendly to me.
9. 這學校的老師對我這種人不感興趣。  
Teachers here are not interested in people like me. (negative item)
10. 我在學校裡參與了很多活動。  
I am included in lots of activities at this school.
11. 我與其他學生得到同樣的尊重。  
I am treated with as much respect as other students.
12. 在這學校，我感覺與大部份學生很不同。  
I feel very different from most other students here. (negative item)
13. 在這學校，我能真正地做回自己。  
I can really be myself at school.
14. 這學校的老師尊重我。  
The teachers here respect me.
15. 這學校的人知道我能將工作做好。  
People here know I can do good work.
16. 我希望我是在另一間學校就讀。  
I wish I were in a different school. (negative item)
17. 我以屬於這所學校而自豪。  
I feel proud of belonging in this school.
18. 這學校的學生喜歡我的方式。  
Other students here like me the way I am.